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## **“IN DATA THEY TRUST”: THE *POETICS* OF CITIZEN-GENERATED DATA IN BRAZILIAN CANNABIS ACTIVISM**

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### **Introduction**

What happens when grassroots organizations decide to produce data? What rounds of legitimization do grassroots-situated knowledge need to follow to transform their own data into actionable evidence? Who decides what counts and what doesn't count as evidence? At least since the Covid-19 pandemic, and amid the pressures of an increasingly datafied society (Kopper & Knox, 2024), a diverse wave of practices, tools, and imaginaries around data production has been gaining momentum in Brazil. These initiatives emerge not only as responses to informational gaps but also as active strategies of political struggle, capable of reshaping forms of activism and rethinking traditional notions of citizenship and the role of the state. From alternative censuses carried out in favelas to participatory consultations organized by networks of social movements, the country has become a living laboratory for understanding how data and citizenship intertwine, not as abstract categories, but as material and immediate disputes over visibility, agency, and rights.

The expansion of citizen-generated data (CGD) initiatives reveals not only the creativity and adaptability of civil society organizations but also new arenas of conflict between state and society. By incorporating data into everyday activist practices, these organizations are challenging the historically centralized role of the state as the sole arbiter of what counts as legitimate evidence. In this context, as the state monopoly over data regimes (including production, collection, and interpretation) is weakened by emerging sociotechnical arrangements of data production (Kitchin, 2014), new tensions arise. These disputes involve cycles of legitimization, mediation between local knowledge and institutional recognition, and broader impacts on citizenship and public policy. This paper is the final draft of a study I presented at AoIR 2025 as the result of an investigation on the activism of the Associação Brasileira de Acesso à Cannabis Medicinal do Rio de Janeiro (Abrario), a Brazilian bottom-up organization based in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, that is confronting the state by producing and circulating data on cannabis-based medicine.

## **Critical Data Studies *with* Brazil**

Building on the theoretical framework of imaginaries from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Critical Data Studies, this work lays the groundwork for a discussion on Critical Data Studies *with* Brazil, as vibrant sites of epistemological and political contestation that defy post-factual truth regimes, far-right politics, and spaces of “strategic unknowns” (McGoey, 2012). By centering perspectives from the Global South and advocating not only for Critical Data Studies *from* or *in* but *with* Latin America (Valente & Grohmann, 2024), this work aligns with the “Big Data from the South” research agenda, shedding light on how non-mainstream data practices can challenge power structures and promote epistemic justice. To approach this discussion, I mobilize the concept of datafication as a process that exceeds state-driven (top-down) production and unfolds across multiple scales of action, including communities, movements, individuals, and grassroots organizations. Therefore, this study centers on bottom-up data practices (Couldry & Powell, 2014), situated at what Arora (2016) describes as the base of the data production and circulation pyramid.

It is worth highlighting that although the field of Critical Data Studies is growing in approaches that encourage us to pay attention to “small” data produced by ordinary people or “non-specialists” (Kitchin & Lauriault, 2015), to everyday forms of critical engagement with data (Kennedy & Hill, 2017), and to gender approaches to data and its uses (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2019), there is still a lack of research addressing aspects such as the processes of legitimation, acceptance and credibility of data produced from bottom-up actors, as well as the controversies and disputes around the interpretation and use of data by social movements. Moreover, there remains a pressing need to examine how historical experiences of exclusion and silencing inform peripheral actors’ very imaginaries of data. As Hintz et al. (2022) suggest, it is essential to understand how these organizations and especially their leaders build relationships with data based on memories and traces of state-imposed violence and structural neglect. These data practices do not emerge in a vacuum. On the contrary, they are profoundly shaped by pre-existing social dynamics, directly informing how these actors situate and navigate their struggles. Rather than following a linear path from grassroots data collection to evidence-based policy, these epistemic sites function as arenas of mediation, where multiple actors (including citizens, CSOs, and governments) continuously negotiate meaning, legitimacy, and power.

## **Methodology**

This research has involved data ethnography, a methodological approach that traces how data are produced, circulated, and made meaningful within specific social worlds, and ethnographic fieldwork based on: [1] volunteering within the organization through Participatory Action Research (PAR); [2] in-depth (qualitative, semi-structured) interviews and informal conversations with Marilene Esperança, founder of Abrario; [3] analysis of physical and digital archives of the association. In addition to informed consent for reproducing interviews and interactions, the materials presented in this paper were expressly authorized by Marilene Esperança.

## Conclusion

By mobilizing the concept of good enough data (Gabrys, Pritchard & Barratt, 2016), that is, data generated by ordinary, “non-expert” individuals, it becomes possible to understand how these audiovisual testimonies represent a form of evidence-making and contestation within the highly controversial field of medicinal cannabis in Brazil. Through multiple formats (videos, audios, messages and photographs) and thematic emphases (treatment beginnings, clinical improvements, adjustment processes, and reduction of conventional medications), Abrario not only produces bottom-up knowledge about cannabis’s therapeutic effects but also actively challenges dominant public policy narratives that systematically erase or ignore the experiences of those seeking alternative treatments and appropriate information.

Fundamentally, these grassroots data practices also arise as a response to what can be described as a desert of governmental data on the subject, a context in which official statistics and public health information on cannabis use are virtually nonexistent. Within this void, Abrario’s growing archive of testimonies functions as both a political tool and an epistemic intervention, filling the gaps left by the state and contesting prevailing regimes of knowledge and evidence production. Moreover, by pairing data with stories and reimagining what data is, Abrario not only produces evidence but also challenges the narrow, technocratic frameworks that often define it. Its work reveals that data can be affective, situated, and rooted in lived experience, disrupting dominant narratives that exclude marginalized voices. In this way, Abrario’s archive becomes a space where personal narratives are not reduced to anecdote, but elevated to the status of evidence, reshaping what counts, for whom, and under what conditions. This reconfiguration expands the boundaries of data politics, making room for knowledges historically silenced or dismissed by institutional gatekeepers.

What is at stake here is not only the informational content of these data but also the modes of their production and their social reception. Although this study does not focus directly on medical controversies, it is impossible to overlook how such controversies permeate the social world of cannabis in Brazil, frequently spilling over into the legal realm (Policarpo, 2019). In light of these institutional contradictions and the systematic erasure of alternative forms of knowledge, it becomes increasingly urgent to interrogate the truth regimes that underpin health policies and data production in Brazil. This urgency stems not only from the need to expose inconsistencies or biases within dominant narratives, but from a deeper imperative to question the very foundations of what is considered valid knowledge. The persistent privileging of certain types of evidence, typically those aligned with biomedical rationality, institutional authority, or technocratic metrics, often results in the disqualification or marginalization of other epistemologies, particularly those rooted in lived experience, popular knowledge, and grassroots activism. Within this context, the call to rethink our epistemic and symbolic frameworks around data gains critical relevance. It demands that we look beyond institutional thresholds and begin to recognize the legitimacy of knowledge produced in the margins, knowledge that resists dominant logics and insists on making visible the experiences, needs, and rights of those historically silenced by official narratives.

In this light, the urgency to engage with data imaginaries with Brazil emerges not only as a thematic choice, but as a deeply epistemic and political imperative. It is through this lens that we begin to interrogate the processes of evidence-making and explore alternative, situated possibilities for bringing back the human, the collective, and the affective into the heart of what we call data. In a context shaped by epistemic inequalities, where dominant regimes of knowledge continue to privilege certain methods, institutions, and truths, rethinking data from Brazil's margins becomes a vital act of resistance. It invites us to challenge the "monocultures of ideas," which operate by silencing plural epistemologies, devaluing local and popular knowledges, and naturalizing hierarchies of validity (Krenak, 2019).

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